

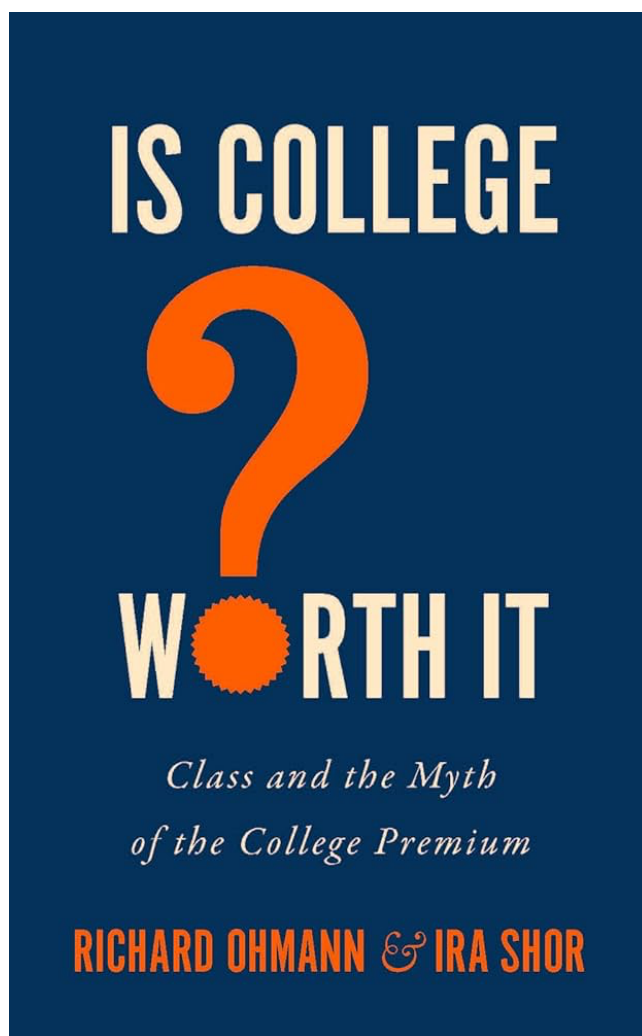
RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Review

Is College Worth It? Class and the Myth of the College Premium

by Bob Rosen



IS COLLEGE WORTH IT? CLASS AND THE MYTH OF THE COLLEGE BY RICHARD OHMANN AND IRA SHOR

Is College Worth It? Class and the Myth of the College Premium. By Richard Ohmann and Ira Shor (2024). Johns Hopkins University Press.

When Dick Ohmann mentioned several years ago that he was working on a book challenging the notion of the “college premium” – the additional lifetime income that graduating college supposedly brings – at first I wondered why. Whether the payoff is real, whether it’s more or less than the often promised one million dollars, seemed like an issue for mainstream economists, and hardly worthy of the kind of sophisticated radical analysis Dick had brought to such subjects as mass culture, the politics of literature, and class and language.* But starting from this deceptively simple question, *Is College Worth It?* develops an expansive critical analysis of an array of important topics, from work to inequality to ideology to, of course, capitalism itself.

Dick died before he could finish his book. In a moving preface, Ira Shor describes meetings and correspondence with him in his last months, during which they agreed that they would work together for as long as possible to revise the five existing chapters and to sketch out the planned sixth chapter, which Shor would write. (For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to “Ohmann’s” arguments when discussing chapters 1 to 5 and “Shor’s” for chapter 6.)

To calculate the college premium, one compares the lifetime income of a college graduate, minus the cost of college, with the lifetime income of a high school graduate. The college graduate loses four years of income and incurs the cost of college, but presumably makes up for this with greater income for the rest of their working life. Academic studies such as “The College Payoff” from Georgetown University and interactive websites such as the US government’s College Scorecard try to calculate the premium, which they always find to be substantial. Politicians, business leaders, and college officials eagerly tout the premium and typically cite the figure of a million dollars. Parents and students considering college, education policy makers, and the general public can’t easily ignore such promises.

But how true are college premium claims? Ohmann wades bravely into a field cluttered with complicated studies, many of them badly designed, and his second chapter offers an excellent lesson in what makes for faulty social science data analysis. His challenges to the validity of these studies are multifaceted and complex, but by sharing the evolution of his thinking rather than just presenting conclusions and arguments, he carries us along with him. Perhaps the biggest flaw Ohmann reveals involves a confusion between correlation and causation. Many cheerleaders for the college premium overlook or minimize the “thunderously obvious” (114) point that those who go to college may differ from those who don’t – due to such possible personal characteristics as industriousness, intelligence, and eagerness for wealth. And that’s still without taking into account socioeconomic factors such as race/ethnicity and gender, family

connections, quality of pre-college education, and the ability to afford college in the first place. Even those studies that try to adjust for some of these differences often ignore differences in college majors (say petroleum engineering vs. art history) and type of college (selective vs. non-selective). Ohmann also points out that the job market is changing ever more rapidly, so that an investment in, say, an IT degree might not bring the expected payoff if you graduate into a world where such jobs have been automated or outsourced overseas.

This is just a small sample of the kind of scrutiny to which Ohmann subjects studies of the college premium, but his point is clear: The claim of a unitary premium guaranteed to all who graduate college is shaky at best. *Is College Worth It?* concludes, not surprisingly, that there is a college premium – but who gets it and how big it is are far more complicated matters than the popular studies imply. As Ira Shor puts it in his chapter, “College pays off for some but not for most, making the college premium both true and false, real and illusory, accessible and restricted at the same time, depending primarily on race, class, and gender.” (192)

Given all its complexities and uncertainties, why then does the notion of a college premium maintain such a grip on both individual thinking and public discussion about higher education? This brings us to the heart of *Is College Worth It?*, which is Ohmann’s analysis of the ideological role that the idea of the college premium plays. The emphasis on the premium is rooted in and reinforces the belief that the key purpose of college is to increase earning power. This is, of course, a real and legitimate concern for all but the wealthiest, but it can marginalize the importance of college as a place of social and intellectual growth and therefore the less “profitable” areas of study such as the social sciences and the humanities. This meshes easily with the view of college as a business, with a focus on efficiency, accountability, key performance indicators, and all the other monitoring and quantifying activities that plague students and teachers alike. It also reinforces the positioning of the student as a consumer purchasing a product as well as an investor banking on a significant return rather than, say, as an active learner seeking a rich, critical understanding of their world.

The college premium dovetails nicely as well with Horatio Alger myths of advancement through hard work, with a corresponding focus on individual as opposed to social improvement, with theories of “human capital development” (88), and with promotion of the marketplace as the final and proper means for defining value and making social decisions. And, of course, a claim of a single college premium, equally available to all, obscures the class structure within which education operates and which it also helps reproduce. It suggests that the student born into poverty and relegated to underfunded schools has the same choice – college or no college – with the same outcomes as the student who has benefitted from expensive private schools, SAT prep, and rich and highly educated parents.

The ideological work done by the focus on the college premium expands when college is promoted as economically beneficial not only to the individual student but to society as a whole. Progressive proposals for “college-for-all” (169) might very well mean culturally richer lives for Americans and better informed citizens, but Ohmann challenges claims that they would mean better economic conditions as well. The comforting belief that more education for more people would benefit everyone reinforces the ideology that we’re all in it together, that employers and employees have the same interests, that the magic hand of the market translates individual strivings into general good. “The rule of capital gains legitimacy,” Ohmann writes, “if citizens believe that more and better schooling can repair the inequalities and divisions troubling our society (along lines of race and gender as well as class).” (164)

An emphasis on the college premium also encourages and justifies increasing vocationalism in higher education, as Ira Shor thoroughly documents in Chapter 6. As colleges scramble for both funds and students, as public and government support for higher education declines, as students increasingly face the prospect of endless college debt, and as employers increasingly demand specific skills, “badge” programs – certificate programs that “certify technical competence in a specific field” (202) – are becoming ever more popular. Thousands upon thousands of these sub-degree programs are on offer in such mini-fields as digital marketing, strategic hospitality, mindful inclusion, brand storytelling, and supply chain analytics (just a small sampling from a single college website).

As the tech sector and digital work in particular grow in size and influence, these badges and certificates, cheaper than degree programs, continue to proliferate. Students with “pre-college privilege” (197), and a few lucky others, will continue to enjoy something like the traditional four-year, best-times-of-your-life college experience and reap a sizeable college premium, but for

most, the badge regime will only intensify the way that the education system “confirms existing inequities while presenting itself as an open ladder to be climbed” (192). Shor concludes the book by tracing how we got here and signs off with a proposed “egalitarian educational agenda” (206) that we must struggle for.

Is College Worth It? is a wonkish book, to be sure, but thanks to Ohmann’s casually eloquent style and Shor’s extensive knowledge, it rewards the effort. And it ends up celebrating, if only by implication, the liberatory value of a genuinely critical education.

Reading this book is unlikely to increase your lifetime income but it most definitely will enrich your understanding of the workings of capitalist ideology.

Note

For an overview of Ohmann’s career, see the book’s introduction by Jeffrey J. Williams, and for a sampling of his contributions to this journal, which he helped found, see *Tribute to Richard Ohmann*, in *Radical Teacher* #123 at

<http://radicalteacher.library.pitt.edu/ojs/radicalteacher/issue/view/30>

Bob Rosen taught English at William Paterson University for 43 years. He is currently co-managing editor of *Radical Teacher* and has edited or co-edited three collections of articles from the journal. He has also published *John Dos Passos: Politics and the Writer* and, with Pamela J. Annas, *Literature and Society* and *Against the Current*.



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